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# The Power Of One Good Book: Creating An Independent Reading Program In An Alternative School To Help Promote Literacy

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The Power of One Good Book:  
Creating an Independent Reading Program in an Alternative School to Help Promote  
Literacy

by

John Forestell

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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### **Dedication**

To my students, colleagues, and mentors; thank you for inspiring me to become a better teacher everyday.

Also to my wonderful wife, Sarah, who sits besides me, grading Spanish tests and homework as I work on this Capstone.

Also to Trudy, my wonderful dog, who reminds me often to take a break, to walk and think.

### Epigraph

“If the only way to become a better reader is to read, how can students be motivated to read more so that they will become better readers?”

-- Donna Carol Franklin Clemenson

“As school may well be the last place where books are valued and promoted, we teachers must do everything we can to keep the magic and beauty of books alive for our students.”

-- Regie Routman

“Reluctant readers may never see what devoted readers already know: that reading can open doors for them in ways that no other activity can.”

-- Janice Pilgreen

“The reading of a book, it is true, has sometimes changed a person’s entire life... In such cases, the book usually opens up a new view of life or a new sense of the potentialities, of human nature and thus resolves some profound need or struggle. The probability of any particular works having so profound and transfiguring effect cannot, however, be predicted or planned for... The possibility that literature may offer such inspiration should, nevertheless, make us eager to stimulate our students to roam freely through a great many types of literary experiences.”

-- Louise Rosenblatt

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## CHAPTER ONE: Capstone Introduction

### Introduction

Author James Patterson said, “There’s no such thing as kids who hate reading. There are kids who love reading, and kids who are reading the wrong books.” Working in an alternative school environment for the past two years, I have seen many students who say they “hate reading,” who are “reading the wrong books,” who do not connect to the culture of reading for numerous reasons. From lack of material that interests them, poor reading ability interfering and complicating high interest material, and even student issues like trauma, chemical use and abuse, and self-defeating behaviors, some students stumble over these obstacles and do not, or cannot, connect to reading, despite it being a critical skill to develop in order to be successful, academically and beyond.

To better tackle this issue, my alternative high school instituted a reading program initiative that has had mixed success in its roll-out. As we reflectively practice and look to improve our students’ skill sets, one question has come to the forefront: *How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?* Our school presents unique challenges to answer this question, but working with dedicated educators who are willing to try new things, who can maintain flexibility in their classrooms as we tweak and change our current methodologies, I am certain that we can create more opportunities for student success when it comes to reading.

After all, student success when it comes to reading is critical. Words, written and spoken, are the building blocks of life; people, relationships, societies are all built on, or out of, words and it is my duty as an educator to equip my students with the best means of interpreting, understanding, and relating to the blocks around them. I want my students to be able to read to help them escape all the pitfalls that await people who are in the lowest levels of literacy in our society, from low wages to imprisonment, from medical costs to systemic oppression. I want my students to be able to read so that they are able to go beyond the comprehension of reading, to go from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” so that no curiosity is beyond their scope, no problem too difficult or answer too hard to be uncovered. I want my students to be able to read so that they will know empathy, a better understanding of our larger culture and world, so they will experience the joy, the transformation, the dreaming that only reading can provide.

In the following chapter, a rationale for the necessity of the SSR program restructuring will be presented, along with insight into our alternative school’s particular conditions and needs of our students. I will describe my students’ and my own realizations about the power of choice within reading, the importance of SSR, and the transformative power it can create in an educational experience. I will provide compelling reasons to pursue this topic and expectations for what may be gained from my capstone project.

### **The Power of One Good Book**

Somewhere around the fourth grade, I lost all motivation to read for pleasure. I would flit between pretending to read comics and pretending to read short, non-chapter

books. My fourth grade teacher, Ms. Welch, noticed and helped guide me to a biography of Harry Houdini, which I read and then used again and again for “book projects” throughout middle school. I would read the required material in class, but when given any kind of independent choice to read, I would stare blankly at pages.

It wasn't until ninth grade, when another student went into her backpack and gave me a dog-eared paperback, that my love for reading was rekindled. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), a story of a time-traveling soldier, abducted by aliens, trapped in Vonnegut's cynical, fate-bound narrative, was like nothing I had ever encountered before. I became so immersed, I didn't stop reading until I had finished the entire book that evening. The next day, I went to the library, checked out the limit of material they would let me, and, since then, have been a constant and voracious reader. If it hadn't been for *Slaughterhouse Five* igniting a passion and curiosity, my life, would've turned out radically different; I can look back at that moment and pinpoint where a major shift occurred in my life, all if not for the power of one good book.

And while that specific book worked in my life as a catalyst, I know that in the ten years of my teaching career that books have had the same powerful effect for different students. I gave Jared (all student names are pseudonyms), a ninth grader going through a difficult moment, a copy of Nick Hornby's *Slam* (2008), due to the similar problems the protagonist faces in the story. He read it over the course of a few weeks and proudly announced to the entire class that it was the first book he had ever read by himself. Miranda had a similar moment of success when given Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010). She said, “I've never read something that made me want to keep reading before.

I just wanted to know what was going to happen next!” Last year, Markiss, a senior in high school who was so credit deficient that it looked impossible that he would graduate on time, was given time and space with a good book. He quickly read Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2005), and then went on to read *every single book* written by Riordan before he graduated on time. He said, “These books gave me a reason to make better choices, to focus on school. Percy Jackson is a big part of why I’m graduating.” Noah got so caught up in Sean Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (1998) that he wrote notes in the margins to future readers, “This part is important! PAY ATTENTION HERE!!!” Even Joe, who has proudly and defiantly said that he’s never read a book and now won’t be the time to break that streak, caved after being handed Stephen Chbosky’s *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999).

When students are given time and choice, reading can become a transformative experience. There can be a magical moment where students who have been reluctant readers suddenly cross over some invisible barrier and become members of the culture of reading. As a language arts educator, it is my job to facilitate as many of those magical moments as I can, giving my students time and opportunity to connect with their interests.

### **The Alternative School**

I joined an alternative learning center (ALC) two years ago. Even before receiving my initial teaching license from Hamline University, I worked with “at-risk” populations of students as a behavior management paraprofessional, and once equipped

with the credentials, I sought out programs that let me interact with this challenging, but fun, group of students. I firmly believe that one of the ways to address the systemic inequalities in our society is through the enfranchisement that education can provide for marginalized populations -- they are often categorized as “at-risk” in our school systems because those systems aren’t designed to often help them succeed. After working at both of my districts’ traditional high schools, primarily teaching remedial classes to “at-risk” students, an opening at our ALC prompted me to apply -- here was an opportunity to fully invest in working with this student population, bringing my skills to a new environment that embraced more of a constructivist pedagogy.

Our alternative school, located in a second ring suburb of a major metropolitan area, is small; our student population grows throughout the year, but we provide credit recovery for approximately 120 to 225 students. Our students have chosen the ALC because they were not successful in traditional academic settings for a myriad of reasons. Our school building, while primarily homogeneous, has more cultural diversity than our traditional high school counterparts; attendance is comprised of 52% free and reduced school lunch eligible students and 32% are students of color (“Minnesota Report Card,” 2017). However, most surprisingly, of our graduating seniors, only 18% had met or exceeded reading proficiency as defined by the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) test.

I knew that I needed to improve these numbers as one half of the language arts department, so I instituted a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program in the third quarter in my classroom. Students would read for twenty minutes

every Tuesday and Thursday; they could read whatever they liked from home, on their phones, or from my very limited classroom library. Even with that small intervention, we saw some change in student data by administering the ACCUPLACER reading portion at the beginning of the quarter and again at the end of the school year. While part of the positive data may have been the correlation of taking the test for the second time, we saw enough increases from not proficient moving towards proficiency.

Of my ninety-five students surveyed from the beginning of the third quarter to the end of the fourth, 59% that originally tested into the “Needs Improvement” were reduced to 50% -- which is still a significant amount of students that were not proficient (Forestell, 2017). The 15% of students originally identified as “Limited Proficiency” was bolstered to 20%, as some of the students in need of improvement moved into this category, and the original 8% that tested as “Proficient” was increased to 30%. This limited trial’s data was positive enough that we decided to try an SSR initiative as a building, although we all recognized that SSR was a possible correlating factor for this change in student success.

### **SSR by Committee**

Working in a committee with other invested teachers, the ideas of how a reading initiative would look, or what individual teachers would allow, quickly altered what had been an easy classroom activity. We knew that a traditional high school, on the other side of our metropolitan area, with similar demographics to ours, had success by implementing a school-wide reading program that resulted in improved literacy scores on standardized tests. Guided by Kelly Gallagher’s *Readicide* (2009) we knew that

providing classroom time for the student pursuit of reading was crucial. Gallagher warns of the problem of incentivizing independent reading, tying on grades or points to this independent activity, but several committee members felt that would be necessary if it took up classroom instruction time. Also, an issue of “fairness” was brought up; teachers did not want to have one hour fall behind in instructional pacing on Tuesdays and Thursdays due to reading time. The compromise was that all class periods would use the first ten minutes to have students engage in independent reading each and every day -- increasing the time to one hour a day, but only in ten minute chunks.

### **The Issue of “Buy-In”**

There are also various levels of “buy-in” by staff members. While most staff have followed the committee’s plans with fidelity, some dedicated educators simply do not enjoy the habit of reading. So during this ten minutes of time, they may grade assignments or reply to emails, but our initial understanding was that staff would model good reading habits for students. Other staff members feel pressure to continue with their own instruction, to advance in their own curriculum, and choose to not give students reading time for a few days stretch at a time. This inconsistency causes some students to become frustrated, either with the teachers not following the original plan, or, more often, with those who do. “We didn’t read in Phil’s class today! Why do we have to do it here?” “If Amy doesn’t read, why do I have to?” I believe consistent implementation is key to the success of our SSR program.

Student “buy-in” also waxes and wanes. Some of these setbacks are circumstantial while others have deep-seated roots in educational inequities. Some

students become deeply involved in a text, once completed they simply fritter away time due to lack of the next thing they would like to read. Our limited language arts department budget is further impacted when we use funds to purchase books for independent reading, while our colleagues may not financially contribute to this initiative's possible success. Getting the right materials into the hands of our students is a necessity. Other students' reading levels are so far below grade level that helping them find reading material that they are able to process is challenging. I know that approximately half my students are not proficient at reading at grade level. Imagine a student who is told daily, even hourly, to read something, but all classroom materials are beyond their ability to comfortably read. Doesn't that student develop fatigue, or even "chronic stress," at this constant calling to a task that is beyond them? Don't some begin to develop negative behaviors to avoid the reproach of their teachers? How our reading program is currently set up may actually turn off more students to reading.

### **Other Stumbling Blocks**

Despite the inconsistency in its implementation, the SSR program is successful, but it is not as effective as it could be. One of our greatest struggles is simply having things for students to read. Despite being a large alternative school, our building does not have a library, or a media specialist, so that role has fallen to myself and my colleague in the language arts department. We've farmed out large sections of our personal classroom libraries, books we've amassed in my ten years teaching and her five, to our colleagues. However, this simply does not meet the needs of all of our students. We made one outing as a staff to Half Priced Books and encouraged teachers to purchase ten books for their



classroom that we would use our department funding to reimburse, but this still falls drastically short of the need.

There is also currently not a system to keep track of which students have been lent a book from which classroom. We know that students have “stolen” books from our school -- which may be the most laudable crime a language arts teacher can hear about. I have purchased my third copy of *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), this year because students have developed a deep connection to that text and taken it from our school, but this is an expensive recourse and unsustainable.

I have purchased, in bulk, dated magazines and comic books just to have material that I can place in student hands. However, most students look at a *MAD* magazine from 1997 with more incredulity than interest, and while things like *Hot Rod Magazine* or *National Geographic* remain more or less unchanged by time, they aren't usually the magical touchpoint that ignites a student's innate desire to read.

Technology could be a useful resource to help connect students to interesting material, but here we also fall slightly short of the mark. Four of our twelve classrooms have classroom sets of chromebooks, which could help some, but not all, students find something to read. We also have a limited budget to sign up for subscription services that may help students find high interest material at their needed reading level. Our chromebooks don't compete with the easy access to the “literature” of Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook that inundates student smartphones. While I argue that “all reading is good reading,” and encourage the use of smartphones to help get students to

connect with material, some staff simply do not allow the use of electronic devices to read because it is in conflict with our “power down” stance on personal technology.

Most disappointingly, students at our counterpart traditional schools are signed up in a partnership with our local county library upon enrollment into classes. This enrollment doesn’t happen at our alternative learning center -- partially due to the “transient nature” of our student population; many students come to our school from neighboring school districts (Mahtomedi, North St. Paul, Stillwater, and Mounds View) which lie beyond our county’s borders. Even if we did enroll students in the county library system, “field trips” to the library would be sporadic, only taken on by teachers who feel driven to do so, and at the cost of obtaining a van or bus for the day to transport students.

All of these obstacles hinder the efficacy of our SSR program. However, if we were to systematically analyze these stumbling blocks, develop structures to help minimize, alleviate, and change, we could begin to improve our programs efficiency and maybe even foster a life-long love of reading for some students, giving them access to the culture of independent readers.

### **Summary**

To answer the question, “*How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?*” I will research what best-practice options are available and deliver my findings to my colleagues during our professional development; together we will implement changes to how we deliver this SSR program so it is in line

with the best practices and also look at how to better support our students to connect with materials and become better readers.

Our small, alternative high school is a credit-recovery school where students attend usually because they face some deficit in their educational background. An effective way to narrow these educational gaps, I believe, is to help students become better readers. That doesn't happen easily; it requires the creation and monitoring of careful scaffolds that allow students to be independently successful, driven by choice and interest. If provided with the right SSR program, it is my belief that students will improve in reading ability, academic performance, and even connect to a lifelong habit of reading. This capstone has developed from my desire to see student success, but moreover, with my frustrations of the detriments we face as a school by engaging in this work only partially prepared. Knowing the power of one good book, that it can be a transformative force in a young person's' life, I believe getting this program working correctly to be critical.

In Chapter Two, I will explore and review the literature around SSR programs, their benefits, and the best practices as to how they are implemented in different schools. After conducting the appropriate research, in Chapter Three I will illustrate the steps and resources I used to create my professional development and plan of action. Chapter Four is a reflection on the entire process and creation of professional development plans and materials.

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

### Introduction

Teaching at a small, alternative high school designed for credit-recovery, students attend usually because they face some deficit in their educational background. An effective way to narrow these educational gaps is to help students become better readers. That requires the creation and monitoring of careful scaffolds that allow students to be independently successful, driven by choice and interest.

This then asks the question, “*How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be structured to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?*” If provided with the right SSR program, it is my belief that students will improve in reading ability, academic performance, and even connect to a lifelong habit of reading. Currently, the detriments we face as a school by engaging in an poorly implemented SSR program do not help us meet our student needs or these goals. Knowing the power of one good book, that it can be a transformative force in a young person's' life, this work becomes critically importance.

The literature review in this chapter will focus on four main areas: student reading development and motivation, the efficacy of SSR programs, how those programs are implemented in best-practice, and resources and partnerships to enhance reading culture. Most students begin schooling with a high level of intrinsic motivation to read, but they tend to lose this motivation as they get older (Buchanan, 2009). If certain interventions,

like direct instruction, close reading, and fluency strategies, aren't made, students, by the time they reach secondary schools, may have large gaps in their ability and motivation to read. While illiteracy can be identified and combatted, aliteracy, the lack of desire to read, is more subtle to identify and harder to treat (Weeks, 2001). Student motivation is a critical aspect of creating successful readers.

The data around SSR programs and their effectiveness, and the mild controversy around that issue, will be explored. Due to the National Reading Panel's 2000 report, SSR and other independent reading programs fell out of vogue briefly with administrators and educators who felt the need to directly instruct literacy with the looming threat of poor student performance on high-stakes tests. However, research shows that independent reading time is the most effective tool for increasing a child's reading achievement (Krashen, 2004). The need for accountability to help students perform on high-stakes tests, and yet give them the freedom and choice to construct their own reading achievement, forces educators to look at how to best implement a SSR program. While some format of sustained, silent reading programs has been used since the 1960's, SSR has continually developed and, thanks to researchers like Pilgreen, Krashen, Beers, and more, strategies and supports can be put in place that ensure SSR is structured to create student success.

Finally, in order to overcome issues of motivation, implementation, and to help ensure effectiveness, partnerships and resources that will help student success must be explored. From the creation of literacy committees to local partnerships, like donor organizations or the local library, and from helping select the best materials for students

to assistive technologies that can help students connect to lifelong literacy; the SSR program goes beyond the scope of the classroom and school initiative to become fully realized.

### **Student Reading Development and Motivation**

Students who attend alternative schools do not typically achieve academic success to the same degree as their counterparts in traditional high-schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). While there can be a wide range of reasons for difficulties in school; it is imperative that schools try to address these deficits. Reading for pleasure increases throughout childhood until the age of twelve to thirteen, at which point it begins a decline that lasts through adolescence (Howard, 2011). Students who are unmotivated to read are hit twice as hard on their reading development. “The Matthew Effect” describes students with limited desire to read, leads them to less time spent reading (Stanovich, 1986), which can lead struggling readers to develop low reading self-efficacy and eventual negative attitudes toward reading. Furthermore, research has shown that those with low levels of literacy are more likely to earn less money and experience poverty, and literacy has a significant relationship with a person’s overall happiness and success (Cockroft and Atkinson, 2017). However, possible steps to avoid these issues may lie in the volume of reading a student completes. Allington (2014) concludes that dramatic increases in reading volume, time spent reading, are critically important for developing thoughtful literacy proficiencies; that the volume of reading students accomplish is tied to their reading achievement. However, not all students willingly engage in reading; identifying these students to best differentiate for an independent reading program is necessary.

## **Types of Readers**

Beers (2003) identified two types of readers: dependent readers and independent readers. Independent readers thrive during reading, while dependent readers are the kids who “can’t read.” This is a broad definition, meaning that students could struggle with decoding single-or-multi-syllable words, low automaticity in reading aloud, inability to recall specific information, trouble making inference or generalization, and inability to connect text to other texts or the student’s own life (Beers, 2003). Once interventions are enacted to help students become fluent readers, they may still choose not to read. Aliteracy, individuals who can read but choose not to, is a major obstacle to student engagement and motivation to read (Beers, 2003).

Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009), identify a continuum of readers, from disengaged to engaged, during independent reading time. Disengaged readers fall into four categories: fake readers, challenged readers, unrealistic or wannabe readers, and compliant readers. Fake readers are apathetic towards reading; they have rarely enjoyed a book and believe they never will. Challenged readers find reading difficult and read below grade level. Unrealistic or Wannabe readers continually choose inappropriate books and struggle with comprehension issues. Compliant readers read because they were told to; they rarely read for pleasure and choose their texts randomly.

Engaged readers are also in four categories: nonfiction readers, “I can, but I don’t want to (even though I enjoy it)” readers, stuck in a genre (or series) readers, and bookworms. These readers, while on the engaged spectrum, may also feel unmotivated

to read occasionally. Nonfiction readers may feel that teachers or schools only value fiction and chose not to engage. “I can, but I don’t want to (even though I enjoy it)” readers would rather do something else than reading -- thrilling plots, a good series, or specific author can draw these students in. Stuck readers tend to know what they like to read, but teachers must help student foster a desire and ability to read a wide variety of texts. Bookworms are fanatics, but may lose interest if not give a steady stream of good reads. Knowing where a student falls in their desire to read is the key to help them become motivated, independent readers.

### **Prominent Motivational Theories**

Motivation can be influenced and changed. Baker (2003) defines intrinsic motivation as a natural desire to learn or read about a topic of interest. This kind of motivation comes from within and is formed by curiosity, involvement, and importance (Buchanan, 2009). Extrinsic motivation, or external factors, may be created by recognition, reading for grades, or competition. Buchanan, in her 2009 study of factors that motivate student readers highlighted four prominent motivational theories: attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, achievement goal theory, and self-worth theory.

Attribution theory is a “person’s explanation or perceived cause” of why a particular event turned out as it did. Self-efficacy theory refers to a person’s beliefs or self-confidence to perform a task a specific level of performance -- those with more self-confidence are more likely to engage in more challenging activities. Achievement Goal theory looks at different purposes for achievement -- task orientation looks at skill mastery, and goal orientation focuses on comparison to others. Finally, Self-Worth



theory focuses on a person's perceptions of their own abilities as the drive for a given task. According to Seifert (2004) a student may possess a low self-worth in reading, because they struggle to succeed in reading tasks.

By looking at these different theories, we can begin to extrapolate why some students struggle with reading and others do not. According to Pitcher et al., who developed the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile*, "Motivation to read is a complex construct that influences readers' choices of reading material, their willingness to engage in reading, and thus their ultimate competence in reading, especially related to reading tasks" (2007, p. 395). The necessary transition is for students to move from reading because they are instructed to do so, towards reading for their own personal growth and success.

### **Intrinsically Motivating Principles**

Extrinsic rewards, such as points, progress charts, or even candy for students reading, eventually lose their novelty and can cheapen the value and love of reading (Armstrong, 2016). More legitimate extrinsic rewards focus on leadership, opportunities, or experiences, but can be difficult to create or manage. Educators must focus on moving towards creating intrinsically motivated readers and learners.

Williams, Hedrick, and Tuschinski (2008), created eight principles around helping intrinsically motivate students towards a lifetime love of reading; they are: Choice and Control, Social Interaction, Novelty, Feedback/Response, Attainable Success, Interest, Real-World Experiences/Relevance, and Positive Learning Atmosphere.

- Choice and Control: students are more engaged in their tasks when they are allowed greater opportunities to make learning choices. When not given any choice, students are not inspired to be proactive in their participation.
- Social Interaction: readers grow as readers in communities. “Providing opportunities for productive social interactions can increase children’s effort and persistence, which may increase children’s locus of control, sense of efficacy, and competence” (Williams et al., 2008, p. 136).
- Novelty: students naturally seek out new experiences and behaviors in learning situations.
- Feedback/Response: students seek out feedback continually on how they are doing; providing effective and continuing feedback can be a strong motivator.
- Attainable Success: in order to be motivated and engaged in school and learn from their work, students need to succeed in the vast majority of tasks they undertake. Creating opportunities to be successful often can increase student motivation.
- Interest: paramount to student motivation, the task of the educator is to make the learning activity, like independent reading, so appealing that students can’t resist partaking. Enticing materials and discussions need to help guide students towards their choice.
- Real-World Experiences/Relevancy: teachers need to have reading material in classroom libraries that reflect their students’ cultures and experiences.

- Positive Learning Atmosphere: teachers should cultivate an atmosphere in which values and ideas are respected, as seen through self, with others, and in texts.

By applying these these principles we can help motivate students to become better readers. “Determining students’ attitudes towards reading, giving them experiences with different texts, providing them with opportunities to select resources and to read them in school, and helping them to connect skills and strategies to interesting and meaningful contexts are on a few of the ways that support the lifetime reading habit” (Sanacore, 2000, p.23). Using these motivating principles, educators can not only determine students’ attitudes towards reading and engagement, but can create opportunities to influence students towards lifetime literacy habits.

Research by Swinehart (2011) looked at longitudinal data in students’ self-concepts as readers and the value they placed in reading. In the transition between sixth grade and eleventh grade, she found, through the *Motivation to Read Profile*, that over time, students felt less competent in reading, however interest level, in choice text selection, was the motivational force that determined whether avid or resistant readers read (Swinehart 2011). She concluded that the positive correlation between reading frequency and increased student achievement showed that time for independent reading in secondary schools needed to become a priority. Without that, students no longer saw reading as a pleasurable, leisure activity, but viewed reading as an educational burden, furthering the declining trend of interest in reading.

### ***Readicide***

Schools have become the unwitting co-conspirators in the decline of reading, according to Kelly Gallagher (2010), one of the leading voices in literacy education. The National Council of Teachers of English released a report in 2006 that showed some alarming trends. Secondary students, in the United States, are reading at a rate significantly below expected levels; almost 8.7 million secondary students, about one in four, are unable to read and comprehend textbook material. Reading scores are the lowest in decade, and Gallagher thinks that teachers are partially to blame. Schools employ practices in order to raise reading scores, but may instead kill students' love of reading, or commit readicide (Gallagher, 2009).

Gallagher believes that there are four factors that contribute to readicide: schools value the development of test takers over the development of readers; they limit authentic reading experiences; teachers over-teach books; or they under-teach them. Schools tend to focus on test preparation, which drives shallow teaching and learning. Common Core State Standards emphasize breadth of knowledge over depth, and while there was a slight uptick on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the short-term, average scores are now below 2002 levels.

Gallagher argues that students would be better served if curriculum was slowed down and students were taught to think. Schools limit authentic reading experiences that enable them to become literate, well-informed adults, by focusing on broad curriculum and high-stakes tests. Teachers, he says, should be guiding real-world reading, assigning critical reading of text and media that help students connect or create prior knowledge.

The over-teaching of books, simply put, is that, “in the quest to prepare students for every standard that might be covered on this year’s exams, teachers now chop great books into so many pieces that books cease to be great” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 39) The opposite holds true for under-teaching; if students could read academic texts and challenging literary works on their own, they would not need teachers. Giving students a “great book” is simply not enough (Gallagher, 2010).

Teachers must promote close reading -- having students read large, uninterrupted chunks of text and then strategically having them return to key passages for second- or third-draft reading and thinking. This helps students create a critical reading and thinking lens. Opportunities for students to engage in close reading are increased when reading for pleasure is brought back into school. After all, students who read for fun have higher reading scores than students who rarely read for enjoyment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

### **The Efficacy of SSR**

Educators know that promoting intrinsic motivation, that helping students become readers who enjoy reading, is critically important work. Gallagher argues that reversing readicide by loosening constraints of demanding, testing-oriented curriculum and bringing back pleasure reading is the possible solution. Educators then should take a serious look at independent reading programs like Self-Selected Reading, or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). SSR grew out of reaction to pedagogical trends in the 1960s and 1970s that favored drills and worksheets to teach literacy skills (Armstrong, 2016), but data on silent reading, time spent reading, and reading achievement have gone back as far

as 1937 (Manning, Lewis, and Lewis). The concept is not new. Lyman Hunt introduced “USSR,” or Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading, in 1970, and programs very similar in nature go by a myriad of names: SSR (Sustained, Silent Reading, or Self-Selected Reading, or even Shut up, Sit Down, and Read), FVR (Frequent Voluminous Reading or Free Voluntary Reading), DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), SQRRT (Super Quiet Uninterrupted Reading Time), POWER (Providing Opportunities with Everyday Reading), and more (Gardiner, 2001). Whatever the name, three key components are followed; students read a book of their choice, reading time is predictable, and there is a low-stakes accountability scheme in place (Armstrong, 2016).

### **The National Reading Panel**

While having students read in school to improve their reading seems like common sense, the National Reading Panel’s influential report did not recommend SSR, but instead encouraged further research (2000). The NRP looked at fourteen short-term studies and saw the results of SSR as inconclusive, leading it to fall out of vogue with many administrators who did not want to leave important instruction time to non-high-performing, data-driven instruction (Armstrong, 2016). Stephen Krashen and Richard Allington rallied around SSR programs in reaction to the NRP’s seeming dismissal of constructivist approaches to teaching literacy.

Allington, the former president of the National Reading Conference and literacy educator, is quick to point out that thirty years of federal education policies have really boiled down to education privatization, teacher disempowerment, and a systemic business model, all that impede improving reading instruction (2002). The NRP’s report,

Allington argues, was highly subjective, seeking a political solution, rather than being based on best-practice and time tested methodologies. Krashen (2005) takes note that, “many studies comparing in-school reading to regular instruction show no difference between the two groups in gains in reading comprehension” (p. 445). The NRP did not consider any studies lasting longer than one academic year. In Krashen’s own meta-analysis, he found that only three times out of fifty-three studies that students fared worse participating in in-school free reading over regular instruction (2005). Also, when factoring out studies where SSR made “no-difference,” his meta-analysis still finds twenty-four positive case studies that show SSR is more effective than direct instruction. Yoon (2002), however, provides a counterpoint to Krashen, in his finding that sustained, silent reading had little effect on reading attitude and that above the third grade, the effects are almost nil; a student who struggles or does not enjoy reading receives little reading instruction while silent reading, and, thus, it creates another opportunity to engage in an activity that confirms that reading is not enjoyable (Hattie, 2009). Most educators would agree that this “pure SSR,” without any teacher interaction, mini-lessons, or follow-up, and at a level where students are more practicing early reading skills that would require interventions, would indeed be a wasteful use of time (Armstrong, 2016).

### **Digging into the Data**

More compelling data has shown the power of connecting students to reading through choice. Several case studies have looked at the efficacy of SSR programs, structured at the classroom and whole school level. Gardiner (2001) reviewed a study of

SSR to assess improvement in vocabulary and reading comprehension among high school students in Colorado. After eighteen weeks, reading achievement in vocabulary and comprehension showed an improvement of 1.9 grade levels over the control group. Quinn (2017) used a short, eight week SSR intervention and measured student lexiles and found that 100% of the experimental student group improved in their lexile scores from .5 grade level to 1.5 grade levels. Dickerson (2015) had similar results after implementing SSR for ten minutes at the beginning of class, three day per week. The reading ability of a sample of students from her classes improved one to three grade levels and 96% of her students reported that they enjoyed reading as much or more than before the intervention. Ozburn (1995), in a year long implementation of SSR found that all students improved their reading level, averaging 3.9 grade levels. Cuevas, Irving, and Russell (2014) conducted a randomized, controlled, experimental study on the effect of independent silent reading on high school sophomores and found that students in the experimental group gained 1.8-1.9 grade levels over the course of a semester in comparison to .7 grade levels for the control group. Krashen summarizes all these results when he says, “SSR results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development” and that SSR “provides a foundation” for acquiring and building literacy (2004, p. 23).

School climate and student motivation can also change when whole schools implement independent reading programs. Parkdale Middle School implemented a SSR program, in 2006, where all members of the school were expected to read on a consistent and continual basis. Administrators advocated for the program by making it a top



priority, providing ongoing professional development, and committing resources, time, and money. The result, as described by Daniels, Marcos, and Steres (2011), was a thriving school culture geared towards literacy and “a family of readers within the school” (p. 2).

Grant Street Secondary School, a social justice guided education site in New York City, implemented a daily, thirty minute SSR program and found that “reading growth in one year was two to three times greater than that of their peers nationwide” (Francois, 2013, p. 8). Moreso, by providing meaningful independent reading experiences -- time and space for reading, and transforming SSR into a social enterprise through resources, conversations about books, and exposure to reading practice, Grant Street cultivated a culture of reading (Francois, 2013).

Noble High School, in rural southern Maine, also implemented a literacy program that included a schoolwide SSR program (Perks, 2006). Beginning with a literacy assessment, the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), and a follow-up for students at below-proficient levels, the Diagnostic Assessment of Reading (DAR), Noble High School had accurate data on student literacy skills. The SSR roll-out occurred with twenty-five minutes of sustained, silent reading at the same time every day with a pass-fail grade assigned. Administration highly encouraged teacher involvement citing that, “the beginning of the end of many SSR programs occurs when teachers stop modeling reading during SSR” (Perks, 2006, p. 18). That sentiment is echoed by McCracken (1971), when he said, “the failure of the teacher to set an example by reading silently invites students to quit reading, no matter how well the SSR habit seems to be

established” (p. 523). Before the SSR implementation, approximately two-thirds of Nobel’s 1,100 students failed to meet minimum competencies on statewide measures, however, within two years of the program, 84% of the students were reading at or above the proficient level. Students who received targeted interventions during this time averaged gains in reading ability between two and three grade levels (Perks, 2006).

Whether in the classroom or as part of a school-wide implementation to enact a culture shift toward reading, time and again, sustained, silent reading programs have shown to be beneficial for all readers. While the NRP’s 2000 report was not a condemnation of SSR, as it was seen by some, it requested further research. Manning, Lewis, and Lewis, (2010), provide another meta-analysis of SSR research. Their findings were that none of the SSR studies they reviewed reported that students who had independent reading time scored significantly lower on any reading achievement measure than did students who had regular reading instruction -- in almost all instances, students who had access to reading time scored higher than their non-reading counterparts. Furthermore, outcomes were not, “statistically significant for heterogeneously grouped readers, or for average and high level readers, but for low level readers and those learning English as a Second Language, reading scores were significantly higher than non-readers” (Manning, Lewis, Lewis, 2010, p. 120). Students at an alternative school, those with difficulties in reading especially, would benefit from the implementation of a sustained, silent reading program.

### **The Best-Practices of Implementing a SSR Program**

“Given that student with disabilities tend to struggle with reading and are overrepresented in alternative setting, it is crucial these schools and programs offer supplementary reading instruction -- literacy skills are considered a gateway to academic success and well as employment and independence” (Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigaian, Cakiroglu, 2016, p. 176). Reading is a critical skill that helps students become successful. Through the data, it can be seen that creating a sustained, silent reading program is of utmost importance; it can help struggling readers through the tough barriers that once prevented student achievement (Williams, 2014). Gardiner advocates for SSR saying, “ten minutes of sustained, silent reading does not subtract from instructional time; instead, this time offers significant opportunities for students’ language and literacy development” (2001, p. 35). In other words, the overall benefits of a SSR program outweigh the time “taken away” from other instructional activities.

### **The Eight Factors for SSR Success**

Janice Pilgreen literally wrote the book on sustained, silent reading; her “SSR Handbook” is one of the definitive texts on the subject (2000). Within it, she lays out eight factors that determine the common characteristics of SSR after investigating thirty-two different studies about independent reading practices. These eight factors help teachers implement SSR with fidelity and all of the necessary components. They are:

- Access to a variety of appealing texts -- classroom and/or school libraries with a wide range of genres, reading levels, and interests where students can self-select texts.

- Reading materials that appeal to students -- this self-selection includes materials that appeal to students “regardless of the teacher’s preference” and may or may not be appropriately leveled for students (p. 9).
- Conducive reading environment coupled with teacher encouragement -- students will not be disturbed and may relax and enjoy reading.
- Consistent or distributed time to read -- there is a regularly scheduled reading time to promote the habit of reading.
- Reading modeled by the teacher -- teachers read while students read; not responding to emails, grading papers, or other administrative tasks.
- Staff training given to support implementation -- ongoing professional learning opportunities are in place, including book talks, recommendations, and furthering reading strategies. Teachers also establish guidelines and define roles.
- Non-accountability -- students read freely and must not feel as though they are responsible for completing a task or demonstrating comprehension or improvement. Accountability is low pressure, such as short written requirements or follow-up discussions.
- Follow-up activities that engage readers in creative, thoughtful, and non-evaluative ways -- these are purposeful learning objectives that generate enthusiasm for reading.

Given these eight factors are in place, sustained, silent reading programs can be successful.

## **The Role of Books in SSR**

Pilgreen's first two factors focus on the importance to self-selected reading texts. These are student selected, not teacher determined, but it may be important for teachers to help guide students to read books at appropriate lexile levels (Sanden, 2014). Guiding students towards texts is important; asking struggling readers what type of book they would enjoy reading is a good idea, but their responses often lack details to help connect them to the best choices (Beers, 2004). Students must find books that appeal to them, after all the reader's response is the critical response (Rosenblatt 1938/1988). The teacher's job is to aid in finding "the right book for the right reader," and then to teach students to fully engage every time they read (Clausen-Grace, Kelley, 2007). Allington (2014) notes that poor children have considerably more limited access to books than their wealthier counterparts and Krashen (2013) points out that access to books, through community or school libraries, can make up for the effects of poverty on literacy development. Since access to books correlates with voluntary reading, making books available to students is incredibly important (Krashen, 2004). Thus, the creation of a classroom library is a necessity.

While there is some discrepancy in how to best establish a classroom library, it is agreed that every classroom, no matter the subject, is important for setting the tone and modeling how effective readers surround themselves with books (Humphrey, Preddy, 2008). Librarians recommend that each classroom have fifty to seventy-five books available to students, when those libraries can be supported or augmented by a school

library or media center. Those classroom libraries should be refreshed every six to nine weeks by an exchange of material at a SSR Lending Library (Humphrey, Preddy, 2008).

Other research supports that classroom libraries must have *at least* twenty unique texts per pupil; this means that if a teacher taught five sections with an average of twenty students each, a classroom library would need at least 400 unique books (Atwell, 2007). Ozburn (1995) recommends thirty-five books per student and stresses that collections are continuously updated. In successful independent reading programs, the constant and continual fresh supply of books lead to common classroom libraries containing up to 2,000 books, organized effectively for student selection (Francois, 2013). Obviously, the largest obstacle to acquiring such a large classroom library is the financial backing, but administrators can be supportive by finding district and state grants and encouraging teachers to scour for high interest material cheaply (Daniels, Marcos, Steres, 2011). Even after the financial investment, classroom libraries are most effective when using the honor system for check out -- when books do disappear, “educators should be grateful that the book found a new home” (Humphrey, Preddy, 2008, p. 32).

### **Time to Read**

Any sustained, silent reading program is based on the idea that there is a set block of time for students, and teachers, to read. Gardiner (2001) thinks that the goals of SSR may be achieved with in ten minutes each day, possibly occurring just within a language arts or humanities class. Other researchers believe that ten minutes is not enough time to let students effectively enter the “flow of reading,” the moment where students become totally immersed in their reading (Grant, 2012). Allington, while talking about younger

readers, believes that ninety minutes of reading time is best, highlighting that volume of reading directly correlates with reading achievement (2007). That, at the secondary level, would be nearly impossible to attain.

Samuels and Wu (2003) found that sustained, silent reading positively affected student performance on a standardized reading test, but having more time to read, forty minutes instead of fifteen minutes, did not lead to significant gains for low ability students, possibly due to the attention span of low level readers. Silva (2010) notes that many students feel that reading is a job one does at school, however if the student who doesn't make time to read outside of school is given time to do just that in school, with a wide variety of materials to choose from, he or she may just start to love reading (Armstrong, 2016). It seems that the solution to the time given to an SSR program lies somewhere in the middle of the research. Most schools create a fifteen to twenty-five minute block of SSR; any amount of time longer than that does not improve effectiveness, and may hinder the program as some students cannot focus on text for more than that amount (Fisher, 2004).

### **Modeling and Continual Staff Development**

SSR time should be considered sacred, never to be interrupted or replaced by other activities, unless in case of an emergency. Often times, staff can be the deciding factor in the success of an SSR implementation based on their willingness to honor that sacredness and model reading (McCracken 1971). Students must be shown that independent reading time is highly valued through teacher actions; teachers should assist in helping students choose books, observing students and identifying those with

engagement issues, conferring, and reading, not by answering emails, grading papers, or writing lesson plans (Kelley, Clausen-Grace, 2009). During independent reading, it is important that teachers closely monitor students' engagement, conference with students, chart off-task behaviors over time to find students who are not appropriately engaged, and then dig in to find the reason behind the lack of engagement (Hilden, Jones, 2012). They still need to model reading too. It is important to see the difference between a teacher being an effective model for reading; holding a book passively in front of a class is ineffective, while enthusiastically introducing books to students, discussing books, and promoting and teaching the skills and joys of reading is effective modeling (Reutzel, Jones, Newman, 2010).

With that said, not all teachers at the secondary level feel comfortable or competent in teaching literacy skills. Some teachers don't see themselves as readers; they may not read for pleasure or have literary lives, reading beyond what is required, but teachers must "buy in" to the ideas that reading is an important and worthwhile activity (Armstrong, 2016). Changing this concept should be one of the main focuses of continual staff development that must take place around any SSR initiative. While this may be an on-going portion of staff development, Preddy (2009) believes that a literacy committee, a cross content-area collaboration between teachers and "reading experts," can build the literacy initiative, implement schoolwide reading promotion projects, increase reading awareness, and promote lifelong literacy habits. She advocates for teacher training on reading promotion, motivation, comprehension, fluency strategies --



teachers then educate each other, making the professional development more organic and applicable (2009).

Francois (2013) encourages staff members to read young adult literature, during school and on their own time, which will lead to a more intimate knowledge of appealing texts for students, putting them in better position to recommend books for students and engage in authentic conversations around those books. Even so, administrators much devote frequent staff meeting to teaching faculty how to talk about books with students. It is difficult for teachers to maximize time in school-wide reading if they lack knowledge about young adult literature; schools must devote time during work days, during in-school faculty meetings, with professional development focused on the task of helping adults be experts in young adult literature (Daniels, Marcos, Steres, 2011). Students believe that reading matters when they see teachers modeling what effective readers look like; everyone becomes more engaged in the process as faculty members show their interest.

### **Extension Activities**

Students must receive feedback on their reading, it is simply not enough to let students have time and choice with a given text (Clausen-Grace, Kelley, 2007). SSR cannot be the only instructional activity in class, it cannot exist within a bubble as a stand alone activity, and to be most effective it requires teachers to provide pre-, during-, and post-reading engagements (Armstrong, 2016). Atwell (2007), encourages the use mini-lessons as pre-engagement activities; these are brief instructional periods that focus on a specific skill or topic, followed by an activity to put the idea into practice.

During-reading engagement can be easy to implement. Gardiner (2005) models silent reading by reading along with his students; both he and his student keep a “Reading Record,” this form tracks the number of books and pages read, but only when a student completes or decides not to finish a text. Atwell (2007) recommends one-on-one conferences with students while they read. She tracks their reading progress and follows up with open-ended questions. Students also write informal letter essays to her every three weeks (Atwell, 2007). Kelley and Clausen Grace (2009), recommended building in written or oral responses into the independent reading time, such as prompts that guide students to write about what they read, then share with a partner.

Post-reading engagements can look several different ways. It may be periodic book-talks, brief presentations about a book the student has read and enjoyed. This not only holds students accountable for reading, but is also helps other students in class know the next good book they may want to pick up (Armstrong, 2016). Grant (2012) recommends the creation of a volunteer, peer-based literacy leadership group that help students become aware and engaged with more texts. These groups could create posters and commercials advertising books and go into classrooms to promote literacy among their peers by leading conversations about what students enjoy reading (Fisher, 2004). These same follow-up activities can be led by a teacher, but Grant’s data shows it is more effective in a student-to-student environment (2012).

Targeted interventions must also be in place for students who are reading multiple grade levels below their peers (Perks, 2010). Extra interventions, such as Read 180 or Accelerated Reader programming -- programs designed to help students with decoding,

increase fluency and comprehension, when combined with SSR provide necessary structure to create reading achievement (Horne, 2014). The practice of giving time and choice to a student for the purpose of reading is not enough; adding in small activities and scaffolds to support student engagement, accountability, and literacy development modifies “pure SSR” to a more effective format, often called Scaffolded Silent Reading (ScSR) (Walker, 2013). R5, another scaffolded approach to independent reading asks students and teachers to Read and Relax (10 to 25 minutes of reading, conferring, monitoring), Reflect and Respond (3 to 5 minutes of thinking about what they have read and recording thoughts in a response log), and Rap (sharing and actively listening to partners and classmates interactions with text) (Clausen-Grace and Kelley, 2007). As long as educators trying to implement a SSR program reference back and use Pilgreens “Eight Factors,” with fidelity, their programs should be successful; R5 and ScSR simply lay out these eight factors in a concrete and succinct way.

### **Partnerships and Resources to Aid Best Practice**

Sustained, silent reading programs, in order to become fully actualized can, and must, go beyond the scope of the classroom or building initiative. Focusing on additional resources and their procurement, through local partnerships, like donor organizations or libraries, can help students engage in the important work of developing lifetime literacy habits. The best materials for students, those most appropriate to aid in student engagement, from the right texts to assistive technologies, must become part of the SSR program to ensure its success.

## **Partnerships and Funding**

Successful independent reading programs are able to place engaging student material within their grasp -- not an easy feat financially. One successful school-wide implementation was at Hoover High School, where administration, in order to financially support the initiative, received a state grant for school improvement (Fisher, 2004). The grant provided each teacher with \$800, or a school-wide total of \$96,000, to purchase books for their classrooms. They were additionally provided with \$500 the following year, a school-wide total of \$60,000, to further add to their classroom libraries with more narrative texts, expository texts, subscriptions to magazines and newspapers. Funding was planned to continue at that level for the foreseeable future (Fisher, 2004).

While this level of funding may seem unattainable, librarian Leslie Preddy recommends a strategic approach to obtaining it (2009). Schools must look at current texts and resources and decide what can be done with them; they should ask if the PTA/PTO is willing to fund some expenses, investigate if a fundraiser or book fair could provide adequate funding, seek out local organizations that are willing to support a project financially or with donated items, and find if there are grants worth considering.

Access to books also need not take place within the classroom or school building. In several case histories, those who grew up in poverty but, nevertheless, had access to books, give wide, self-selected reading the credit for their school success and acquisition of advance levels of literacy competence (Krashen, 2013). Access to libraries has a positive impact on reading development; the better the library (the more books, credentialed librarians, better staffing), the higher the reading scores. In a study of the

data from the PIRLS organization (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), Krashen, Lee, and McQuillan found that while socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of reading achievement, just lagging behind it was access to a library of at least 500 books (2012). Creating a partnership with a local library to provide students with access to engaging texts would be a significant step towards helping students develop literacy.

By showing the efficacy inherent in the data of independent reading programs, schools can help create local partnerships to support the school-wide implementation and help connect students to the culture of reading through lifelong literacy habits.

### **Technology Resources**

A successful SSR program provides students with the right books. Many students in alternative programs read below grade level and may be wary of reading habits due to previous lack of success (Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigaian, Cakiroglu, 2016). To combat aversion and promote engagement, teachers may need to get creative in how they connect students to independent reading.

Dierking (2015) recommends adopting technology, after all young people, from ages eight to eighteen, spend roughly seven and a half hours each day using technology. She researched electronic reading devices, such as Nooks, iPads, Kindles and more, with free-choice, silent, sustained reading materials downloaded on them for student use and found that they can spark curiosity in reluctant readers. Most students reported they liked reading more on the Nooks, even though some admitted their overall attitude towards reading remained unchanged (2015). However, Krashen (2013) feels that until the price

of e-readers becomes more affordable, educators must find ways to engage readers with traditional books.

Phyllis Levy Mandell, School Library Journal's managing and multi-media review editor, recommends audiobooks, stating, "Audiobooks are excellent tools to help student build literacy skills as well as improve listening, writing and vocabulary competencies... (they) offer support to reluctant and struggling readings, special-needs students, and English-language learners" (2010, p.32). While the standard CD player, or even the retro-novelty of cassettes, may bring audiobooks to life for students, schools can also invest in "Playaway" devices, a portable media players designed for circulation in libraries.

Dr. Kai Rush has also looked at how educational technology can help connect students to texts and recommends using Augmented Reality (AR), such as Aurasma or LayAR, apps that attach 3D virtual objects to book covers and are accessible via smartphone or tablet, to hook in reluctant readers (2017). In his study, AR was used to connect existing YouTube book trailer videos, Goodreads' book reviews, and even author's Twitter accounts to books in a school library. Results positively shows that this assistive technology could help students successfully make their own selections of high interest material, taking part of the responsibility off the teacher.

### **Getting the Right Books**

As educators look to build up their classroom libraries to effectively support sustained, silent reading programs, the critical task is finding high interest materials that connect to students. Tom Barron said, "Literate of any genre must provide readers with a

path to seeing themselves. Without that literature is but words on a page” (Lesesne, Beers, 1998, p. 693). This is important to keep in mind when seeking out texts for students -- it must reach the diverse spectrum of readers, connecting and encouraging a readers interaction and transaction with the text (Beers, 2004).

Luckily, finding engaging materials may be easier to accomplish than previously thought. The former *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* published a column quarterly for five years, titled “Books for Adolescents” (Lesesne, Beers, 1998). While slightly dated now, the column shows the different trends that have emerged in young adult literature and offers a plethora of recommendations. Regina Chatel (2001) compiled a list of over 50 young adult texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that, after checked against a rubric for literary evaluation, were considered “Teens’ Favorite Books.”

Fortunately, a significant portion of the most acclaimed children’s literature on the market today actually is perfect for older readers who struggle with reading. Teachers often struggle finding popular literature for their students who read below their grade level, assuming that books written at the level their students can read independently will be “too young” for their interests (Liang, 2002). Trade books and Hi/Lo books can solve this common problem. Hi/Lo stands for “high interest/low reading level,” and these books boast simple vocabulary and syntax, slim page count and short chapters, and gripping storylines (Hi/Lo Roundup, 2015). Libretto and Barr’s *High/Low Handbook: Best Books and Websites for Reluctant Teen Readers* (2002) is a wonderful advisory and collection development tool that can steer educators to over 500 titles that help engage

reluctant readers. Educators will also be best served by looking to partner with or purchase from publishing companies that specialize in hi/lo reading material, such as Capstone Press, Carson-Dellosa Publishing, High Noon, HIP Books, Scholastic, and Sundance (Leko et al., 2013). Kylene Beers also warns that when readers pick up challenging texts, those texts do more than challenge the readers decoding and comprehension ability, they also challenge the readers' self-esteem (2004). While it may be challenging for a teacher to find a book for a tenth grader who reads at a third grade level that still builds fluency, word recognition, and engagement, she recommends teachers seek out sources from The Fast Back Collection, Orca Soundings books, Woodland Mysteries published by Wright Group, Wild Side books published by Jamestown, and *The New York Times Upfront* magazine.

Educators must seek out diverse texts that address real-life problems and represent a variety of cultural, linguistic, and demographic groups that provide students with opportunities to identify with characters who are similar to them (Leko, Mundy, Kang, Datar, 2013). Classroom libraries must have texts that engage older, struggling readers who are anxious to "see themselves" in texts. Students often disengage in reading during adolescence because the texts do not interest them or relate to their daily lives; the inclusion of representational texts matters.

### **Rationale**

Working in a small, alternative high school that is credit-recovery based, students usually attend because they face some deficit in their educational background. An effective way to narrow these educational gaps is to help students become better readers.



That requires the creation and monitoring of careful scaffolds that allow students to be independently successful, driven by choice and interest.

Asking the question, “*How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?*” can provide us with the right SSR program. By enacting upon the research of Pilgreen, Krashen, Allington, Beers, Clausen-Grace, Kelley, and more, it is my belief that students will improve in reading ability, academic performance, and even connect to a lifelong habit of reading.

### **Conclusion**

Decades of research, focused classroom practice, and sound judgement lead to the conclusions that the more students read, the better readers they will become. Based off specific study of reading motivation, SSR programs’ statistical efficacy, necessary structures that provide for successful implementation of SSR, and even extra resources and partnerships that can further help engagement, one can see why providing time for SSR in the classroom is so important. Not only will engaged, independent reading improve student’s comprehension, stamina, vocabulary, and writing ability, but it will also help create lifetime literacy habits, pushing students into membership of the culture of reading. Avid readers are able to face the challenges that confront them in school and beyond.

The literature reviewed in this chapter has shown me much of the necessary knowledge and structures to successfully implement a sustained, silent reading program that will be a critical part of my capstone project. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the

way to best create this project of guiding students towards becoming lifelong readers by producing effective teacher training on the necessary components of a SSR programs, looking to advance partnerships in our community, and procuring resources so each classroom has a library replete with high interest texts.

## CHAPTER THREE: Project Description

### Introduction

After the collection and careful analysis of the literature, a renewed interest in creating and implementing a more effective independent reading program directed me back to my research question: *How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?* In order to be successful, this work must be done collectively and respectfully. I hope to return my colleagues to our original zeal for an SSR program by developing thoughtful, meaningful, professional development. Through this, our building will develop a team of educators - a literacy committee - who will support the implementation as its scope expands, providing direction for future staff development and increasing student involvement in the implementation. This endeavor is also complemented by work done to best support students: creating classroom libraries, developing partnerships, and thoroughly examining the structures in place to see if modifying them could benefit student engagement.

In this chapter, I present information on who the implementation of an independent reading program serves: students and colleagues at an alternative school. An explanation of the project is presented in detail as well as the methodologies to best foster long-term staff support along with the assessment tools to measure its effectiveness. Finally, I discuss the framework for the completion of the project and the timeline of its implementation. The project itself is placed in Chapter Four.

## Project Overview

The culmination of this capstone project is a year-long, school-wide initiative for a sustained, silent reading program. While this initiative is targeted for a small, alternative school, it could be adapted and used by any school setting. Through my research, I found several resources and models for elementary and middle schools, but few schools have researched the effects of SSR in the advanced, secondary level. Even Francois (2013) pointed to the paucity of frameworks for secondary and high schools. By creating staff development that effectively trains alternative school teachers to implement SSR in the classroom, create a schoolwide culture of reading, gauge student involvement, and teach interventions, the framework I create will add to the public scholarship in this topic.

My capstone project initially consists of staff development during summer workshop. This presentation for staff development then branches into the creation of a literacy committee, which steers future staff development centered around student literacy and the SSR program throughout the rest of the school year. During the initial presentation, the compelling data from the literature review will be synthesized and lay the groundwork for conversation of what the staff wish to see changed about the program from its current implementation. Through discussion of the case studies and the insight provided by Pilgreen's *Eight Factors for SSR Success* (2000), we will decide the new directions and adaptations to take place. Creating the necessary daily structures to best support the SSR program, such as timing and low-accountability measures, will be necessary during this phase. Also, as part of the training, I will help educators develop

the necessary knowledge of how to recommend books for students and how to best talk with students to increase engagement and interest.

No matter the direction of the literacy committee, more student resources are required to better support SSR as it functions currently or more ideally in the future. Concurrently with creating staff development, I will also seek out partnerships and funding to acquire more texts. Research shows that a minimal supported school library should have approximately 500 diverse and unique texts that help readers “see themselves” (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillian, 2012). At the ALC this would mean classroom libraries with at least forty books. This is not a cheaply done feat; it will require finding grant money through local organizations and businesses. Also, I plan to establish and organize a partnership with our local county library system to further bolster student access to books.

Students also need to know which books fit best with their interests. A survey, similar to the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile*, needs to be created to measure student engagement and a reading interest survey could be integrated within that. Based off student results, the literacy committee will better know what kind of books to seek out, what motivational efforts are needed to improve engagement, and begin to assemble an understanding of how literacy is changing at the ALC.

### **Audience**

A year-long, school-wide independent reading program will impact all the members of the alternative school where it is implemented. This project is designed for two groups: educators and students. The alternative school I work at employs fourteen

teachers, roughly two per core subject area and a few elective teachers, and ten support staff, including paraprofessionals, a school psychologist, a school social worker, a chemical health counselor, and more. As the research has shown, participation of all employees is critical for success in changing the school to a culture of reading. While not all of those twenty-four adults may consider themselves knowledgeable of young adult literature, my scope is to create a literacy committee composed of a core group of educators to help steer the implementation and grow other educators in their knowledge.

The other critical part of the audience is, of course, the students at the ALC. With a fluctuating enrollment over the course of the school year, the approximately 120 students that begin in the fall must have a clear idea of what success in this independent reading program looks like. The purpose of the staff development is ultimately to train teachers and support staff to help students during SSR, increasing their proficiency and desire to read. As the population of students grows throughout the school year, it is important to remember that all students fall on a spectrum of reading engagement from dependent readers to independent readers, but all need support. The ALC is unique in that we may serve students of radically different skill sets; some of our students read drastically below grade level while others read proficiently. Improving reading ability is at the core of this project; the work by Allington (2014) shows that an increase in volume of reading increases reading ability. In order to improve the percentage of proficient readers among the ALC's graduating seniors, as shown by Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment data, we must connect students with reading, giving them time and choice.

Student interest in reading can also be disparate, as elaborated by Kelley and Clausen-Grace, from disengaged, fake, and challenged readers to engaged bookworms (2009). One aspect of this work is to identify students on these spectrums and match them to intervention strategies and resources. Students must connect to a variety of high interest texts and staff must use proper reinforcement strategies to ensure successful implementation.

### **Methodology**

Engaging adults in the learning process is no easy task; at staff development, teachers need to feel part of the process, not just recipients of knowledge. Malcolm Knowles, the father of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn, knew that adult learners need to know the “why” of the information they are taking in, but also that adult learners need to be involved in the solving of real-life problems (1980). Knowles’ work reminds me not just to present data, but also to help my colleagues “unpack” the data and be equal collaborators in the solving of the SSR implementation issue. Engagement in my staff development depends on interaction between myself as the presenter and my colleagues, but also with my colleagues amongst themselves (Knowles, 1992). My colleagues must pool together their questions, issues, and concerns, and then suggest potential solutions to these issues. At the end of my staff development presentation, I can, as the presenter, also present my own ideas for solving the implementation issues once discussion has ended (Knowles, 1992).

While Knowles can best help guide the underlying ideology of the staff development presentation, it is the work of K. Patricia Cross that better serves the work

of the literacy committee. Cross (1981) helped in the formalized development of Self-Directed Learning (SDL). SDL is a process in which individuals take the initiative, without the help of others, in planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own investigative experiences. It is my hope that, as members of the literacy committee, with some agreement and direction, we will begin to find and read engaging books for our students on our own. This knowledge will be shared through short book talks than can be further disseminated to more staff members, either in staff meetings or individually. Cross' work guides us, as a committee, to set up goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria to use individually, while also developing positive attitudes and independence that allows us to reflect on the learning process and offer support to each other (1981). In the literacy committee this may manifest as creating an evaluation rubric to help talk about books, setting up a number of books to read as a group, and helping each other in the selection process.

Both methodologies seek out consensus. During professional development, Knowles requires us to seek interaction and feedback from all participants to direct pragmatic solutions toward problems. Cross asks us to develop common goals and schemes to help learn and act independently. These methodologies will guide me toward creating an effective implementation of an independent reading program.

### **Assessment**

The effectiveness of this implementation needs to be measured. Before the summer workshop session I will solicit feedback on our current iteration of the independent reading program via Google Forms. This information gives me baseline



data on how staff see SSR in their classrooms, what successes they've seen, and what challenges we still face. Using the professional development to address some of this feedback, I will then ask staff to assess the professional development and how it has possibly changed their thinking around SSR. The assessment will ask teachers and other support staff for "takeaways" and seek out solutions to the problems we face, as suggested by Knowles (1992). This assessment will also seek out members for the literacy committee.

I must also seek assessment of the implementation from students. Adapting the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* into an online survey and immersing a reading interest survey within that would be the first step, occurring in the fall of the school year. Additionally, I am working with district technology specialists to help uncover data on all of our students' reading abilities. Students at the alternative school tend to have some gaps in their testing experiences or their tests do not accurately reflect their ability. Securing access to lexile scores for all students, either through data from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) data, or another test, would be beneficial. This can be used to measure growth of reading ability from the beginning of the school year as correlated by the SSR initiative. Lacking access to one of these tests, a reapplication of the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* in the spring of the school year would also measure changes in students' reading engagement. This information can be used to show students, staff, and other shareholders the program's efficacy.

### **Project Timing**

The formal professional development will take place during summer workshop in late August with the revised implementation of the sustained, silent program beginning immediately with the school year. The literacy committee will be formed, develop norms, and begin its work to increase student literacy. However, the work of procuring new, diverse, and interesting texts must begin long before late August. Fostering partnerships with our local county library and seeking out donations from local organizations and business will be the future work of the literacy committee, but I will begin that work independently and immediately. Depending on the decisions made during staff development and the zeal of the literacy committee, our revised independent reading initiative should be used for the entire upcoming school year, and more effectively so, for at least two additional school years in order to accurately measure its effectiveness.

### **Presentation**

Various formats will be used for the completion of this project. Staff development will be a Google Slide presentation featuring the compelling research, along with accompanying surveys and questionnaires. It will also have examples of book talks, engagement activities, and promotional materials. Correspondence and documentation of outreach to partnerships will also be relevant.

### **Summary**

The idea to collaboratively retool the implementation of our current SSR program arose from my research question: *How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent*

*reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?* By creating a structure for SSR implementation that is specific for my school, but easily adaptable for others, I will be adding to the public scholarship around this topic. Through the creation of a structured, independent reading program, it is my belief that students will improve in their reading achievement and engagement. Through time, choice, and a low-accountability model, with improved teacher support, and increased access to materials, students will be the target audience of this project. However, the project initially starts with helping all staff in the building understand, discuss, and and problem-solve the issues around our current SSR initiative. By creating training for the staff, and extension opportunities for staff to support a modified implementation, we can begin the necessary work soon and see its effectiveness in the coming months and years.

With a better understanding of what this project entails, Chapter Four moves to the actual work of creating professional development, including connecting to resources, organizations, and funding; developing daily structures and supports for SSR; beginning the procurement process; and helping connect teachers and students to engaging material. Chapter Four will reflect on that process, the successes and challenges of the project, and develop final implications for continuing the work.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection

### Introduction

When students can connect to the culture of reading, wonderful things happen; they achieve more in school, lead more successful lives, and develop lifelong literacy habits that benefit them continually. As a language arts educator at a small, alternative school, I strive to help connect my students to this beneficial culture partially through our Sustained, Silent Reading (SSR) initiative. However when that initiative began to stagnate and stall due to uneven roll out, misinformed understandings, and lack of buy-in, I questioned: *How can a self-selected reading or sustained, silent reading (SSR) program be implemented to improve its effectiveness and positively create a culture of independent readers?*

In order to answer this question, in this Capstone work, I have created several pieces to re-engage staff and students. With an initial staff development taking place in late August, staff will be reintroduced to why SSR is an effective tool for all students by looking at clear and convincing data and be given the concrete steps we need to take as a staff to improve our facility of SSR time. With the staff development also comes an evaluation, which seeks out staff feedback and help in decision making. From there a literacy committee will form; I have also created a year-long guided series of meetings and activities to help us dig deeper into the data and practice effective strategies of facilitation. In addition to those staff focused aspects of my Capstone, I have also helped create an online tool based of the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* (Pitcher, S.M. et al., 2007) to help students report their interests in reading and guide them towards

appropriate and high interest reading material. In order to get that material into the hands of my students, I have also written a grant proposal, awarded by our district's education foundation, for \$3000 to be used towards securing approximate 500 books.

In this chapter I reflect on the work of this project and what learnings I have taken away as a student and educator. I make connections to the research in the literature review and illustrate the connections to the project. Furthermore, I investigate the implications of this project, its limitations, and future use, for myself, my school, and other members of the profession.

### **Major Learnings**

I started this project out of frustration with SSR and finish it now with enthusiasm for continuing this important work. One of my major takeaways from this entire experience came up again and again in the literature. It is so obvious and simple that I think educators often ignore its fundamental truth: Reading is good for students. All of the data I encountered repeated this over and over; the more students read, the better off they are. This is true not just from a literacy and skills standpoint, but students who read more lead richer lives; they avoid poverty and prison, they are civic minded, they have deeper empathy skills, and they report more overall happiness than non-readers. It seems so simple, but in order to improve the future quality of our students lives, it is imperative that we help them become readers now. The culture of reading can be transformative. As an educator, of course I wish to help my students be empowered to change the path of their lives, so I must provide time, choice, and structure for independent reading to help root this into my students' daily practices.

The other major learning I internalized is that helping students read cannot be a passive activity. Where our program initially began to stumble was assuming that giving students time to read and choice in what they read was enough. While this may work for a handful of motivated readers, students who seriously need help to achieve must be guided, modeled to, supported, and given opportunities to lead. Any SSR program that carves out instructional time without necessary supports may work short term, but it is the creation of things like professional development, scaffolding systems for students to apply independent reading to strategies, and an flow of new and interesting texts, that will ensure success. Janice Pilgreen's *Eight Factors for SSR Success* (2000) shows clearly in her meta-analysis of 32 different SSR programs that while time and choice are key, the way teachers help facilitate SSR, create a supportive classroom and school environment, and access to materials are just as critical. SSR is not a panacea -- there is nothing magical about giving students books. SSR is a tool that requires hard work, diligent attentiveness, and continuous practice to be beneficial in students' lives.

### **Revisiting the Literature**

The activity of researching for the literature review was uniquely eye-opening. Work by Beers, Allington, and Kelley and Clausen-Grace was insightful, helping identify past obstacles to SSR, types of readers, and strategies to best help them be motivated to read. But it was Pilgreen's foundational text, *The SSR Handbook* (2000), that laid out the clearest path for me to follow to revitalize our SSR program. Elfrida Heibert's *Revisiting Silent Reading: New Directions for Teachers and Researchers* (2010) showed that successful programs have been built upon Pilgreen's ideas, but supplemented by

educators who have developed practical and pragmatic approaches to apply her *Eight Factors of SSR Success*. I used this as the cornerstone for my professional development; these simple maxims are what my school needs to keep at the forefront of all our future planning.

The other piece of research that provided guidance was done by Krashen, Lee, and McQuillan when they studied the importance of libraries (2012). They found that when a student has access to 500 books, it is the second strongest predictor for reading achievement, overcoming the negative effects of poverty on reading development. Many of the students I work with at the ALC come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, sometimes coupled with a lack of motivation for reading. Access to 500 books, with ways to connect them to the right book to help engage them in reading, through high interest texts, extension activities, teacher modeling, and leadership opportunities, can transform their circumstances. The power of one good book, or better yet, 500 good books, could change their lives. With this threshold in mind, I knew I needed to help create access. By requesting capital expenditure funding for texts, writing a grant to my district's education foundation for texts as well, and partnering with our local county library in order to secure library access for all students, I know we can help students on to the transformative path that the culture of reading provides.

### **Implications**

This capstone project directly informs decision makers at my school of the power of a well facilitated and implemented SSR initiative. By gathering all of the staff, presenting the information in my professional development session, and generating an

action plan, lead by the newly formed literacy committee, our SSR program will be recommitted to success for all students. I am fortunate to work in a collaborative school environment where ideas for improvement are welcome from students, staff, and administration. Once re-invested with proper strategies and engaging material, I think we will see a dramatic shift in our school environment. If successful, as measured by the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile*, we may see a shift in expenditures to continue on this course.

The influence of this project does not end in our school building. By requesting both capital expenditure funding and applying for a grant, I will need to promote my research and understanding of SSR to different finance committees, composed of school board members, administration, active and retired teachers, and community members. I believe the research I have found to be clear and convincing, and these influential district members may award necessary funding and ask that I present my findings to other groups. I know the other two traditional high schools in my district, as well as our two middle schools, also have some form of independent reading, relegated only to the language arts department. If I were to present this information to these language arts teachers, our entire group of secondary schools could see a major shift towards literacy achievement.

### **Limitations**

While the initial steps of this capstone project are concretely set and the end goal in sight, it is the middle ground that seems rife with occurrences that may affect the final outcome. As of writing, the awarding of any funding to help purchase texts is still



unknown, and while funding is not necessary, if it is not granted it would hinder the SSR program's effectiveness. The other unknown is still the connection with our local county library. Even though I have several positive interactions with the young adult specialist librarian, who assures me that we will get library cards for all students at the ALC, the logistics of that task are still unsettled, as are the means of student transportation to the library. However, if through some unforeseen event, I know that the most effective SSR strategies are scalable -- they can fit the space they are given. SSR works effectively, if done properly, at a classroom, school, or district level -- even if all of my colleagues shy away from SSR or my school highlights a new and different initiative, I can still be assured that even if only done in my classroom, it will be beneficial for improving student literacy achievement.

### **Future Projects and Research**

While the work of this capstone project seems to be wrapped up, there remains much more work to do. We plan to informally use the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* to find students changing attitudes towards reading; a future researcher could use this same criteria to measure the effectiveness of SSR as an intervention strategy for literacy development. Future capstone project participants may want to investigate better ways to create access of materials for students. My school is limited in our access to technology, but as one-to-one technology schools become more the norm, online access, digital subscriptions, and other uses of technology to supplement SSR seem increasingly important to be studied, organized, and implemented.

### **Communicating Results**

The completion of this capstone project will be directly shared with all staff members in my building, but its circle of influence need not end there. Through my research, I have become a staunch advocate for the inclusion of SSR. I tell my students interesting research statistics that may help motivate them to engage in reading; I tell colleagues and administrators just as much. After ten years of teaching, it is great to feel revitalized by an idea that is so simple and yet so powerful -- a well crafted and implemented SSR initiative can positively change students' lives. Disseminating this information via professional development session, conversations, or publication to the internet seems only a small way of sharing something that should be a priority in every school in the country.

### **Benefits to Profession**

Through my research, I found several resources and models for elementary and middle schools, but few schools have researched the effects of SSR in the advanced, secondary level. Even Francois (2013) pointed to the paucity of frameworks for secondary and high schools. My capstone project addresses this paucity, giving secondary educators clear guidance on the necessary components of an SSR initiative. When implemented correctly, SSR is either as effective as other intervention strategies or more so, with much of the research showing it accelerates reading achievement beyond the normal scope in a school year.

By creating the professional development session, further training through the literacy committee plan, the student tools and assessment through the *Adolescent*

*Motivation to Read Profile*, and the information to include in a grant, along with all the other work, I have laid out a guide that can empower other educators to allow students to tap into the transformative power of reading independently. Colleagues I work with daily and those across the county now have an easily accessible template to roll out an effective initiative that helps students connect to the culture of reading.

### **Conclusion**

Reading is a critical skill to develop in order to be successful, academically and beyond. James Patterson, an author, said, “There’s no such thing as kids who hate reading. There are kids who love reading, and kids who are reading the wrong books.” It has become imperative that educators help students find the right books. In order to increase success in school and out, to end the destructive practice of Readicide, to address the systemic inequalities in our society is through enfranchisement, educators must make the earnest effort to help students become better and more engaged readers. By implementing a Sustained, Silent Reading program, whether in the classroom, a school, or even a district, educators can reach this goal.

Through the challenging work of this Capstone Project I have created a structure that allows educators to tap into the research surrounding Sustained, Silent Reading programs and take pragmatic steps to effectively use them. By engaging in professional development and evaluation, literacy committee formation and a future scope for more professional development, creation of student assessment via the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile, and the grant writing process, all of which can be easily adapted and

adopted by other educators to best fit their own or student need, we have a clear path to help school effectively and positively connect students to the culture of reading.

The right book at the right time in life can have a significant impact; I was a reluctant reader, aliterate during most of my secondary education, but one book changed my course and I became a voracious reader. The opportunity with that text, that I chose, that I had time to read, lead me down the path to eventually becoming a language arts educator. I am passionate about reading due to my own experience, but it has been reinforced by my students' experiences as well. With this clear structure now in place, to effectively use Sustained, Silent Reading, to help transform and reinforce student reading habits, we, as educators, can provide the opportunity for students to connect to the transformative nature of reading, the opportunity to realize the power of one good book.

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